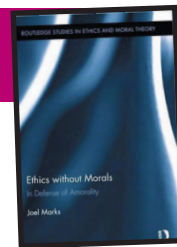




# Books



## ***Ethics Without Morals* by Joel Marks**

REGULAR READERS OF this publication will know that ex-columnist Joel Marks underwent quite a profound change

of outlook with respect to the study of ethics and morality. Formerly a Kantian who worked out in some detail how the moral dictates of pure reason apply to particular circumstances, he is now a moral anti-realist, asserting that there are actually no moral dictates at all! Marks' book, *Ethics without Morals*, is a readable exposition of his new position, which he calls 'amorality', after 'atheism'. Just as atheism denies the objective existence of God, amorality denies the objective existence of morality.

As philosophers, we need to get clear on our concepts. What is morality? Marks' answer: morality is a set of absolute and universal imperatives and prohibitions – a set of rules which everyone is obliged to obey. This set of imperatives is supposed to apply to all human beings at all times and places. The moral rules trump all other rules, and manifest in our feelings as spontaneous intuitions or impulses to obey or enforce them. The essence of morality is its universal, unchanging, and absolute authority in matters of human behavior. Following Kant, Marks calls moral imperatives 'categorical', meaning that they apply unconditionally, and independently of how we feel about them. In brief, morality is a set of obligations that we are all supposed to obey. This is what we mean by the term 'morality', by and large, in common language. And morality in this sense does not actually exist, says Marks.

### **The Genesis of Morality**

Marks argues that there are several possible explanations for our belief in morality, and that the one that does not assume that morality exists makes a lot more sense than the others.

The first possible explanation for belief in morality is that God legislates it and gave us a conscience so we would know right from wrong. The second is that morality is a built-in feature of the uni-

verse, much like gravity, and we have developed an intuition to perceive it. The third is that the belief in morality was a useful evolutionary adaptation that lingers on even though it is no longer helpful.

The evolutionary explanation makes the best sense, according to Marks. Development of a sense of morals was evolutionarily adaptive for early humans because it enabled them to live cooperatively in groups. We evolved to believe in morality because we have to live with others in order to survive, and moral rules regulate how we get along together. A shared sense of morals makes for group cohesion, and those who live in cohesive groups survive and reproduce better than those who don't. As primatologist Frans de Waal has noted, human societies are support systems within which temporary weakness does not automatically spell death (*Our Inner Ape*, 2005, p.187).

Crucially, this explanation does not require that morality actually exist in an objective sense; all it requires is that people believe it does. There is an obvious objection here, and to his credit Marks considers it: this explanation does not require that morality does not exist, either. The evolutionary argument is quite compatible with either of the other explanations. Against this possibility, Marks argues a form of Occam's Razor: the evolutionary explanation alone is simpler and conceptually more economical than it would be in conjunction with either of the others. But Occam's Razor alone is not enough to discredit them, so Marks must consider each independently.

Against the God explanation he cites Plato's *Euthyphro*, in which Socrates argues that it makes more sense to say that the gods love what is right rather than that the right is whatever the gods love. Hence, morality (ie right and wrong), if it exists at all, exists independently of the gods (or of God). This leaves the second idea – that morality is a natural feature of the universe. Against this, Marks argues a number of things: that morality in this sense would be a set of commands without a commander, a nonsensical notion; that the only way of perceiving moral commands is through intuition, but different people have different intuitions, and there is no

way to adjudicate between them; and, that there exists no plausible account of how an objective morality has any connection to the rest of the universe we know about – the idea is metaphysically incoherent. Of the three explanations, the only one left standing is the evolutionary one.

With so much at stake, one would perhaps expect an extensive discussion of just how our sense of morality may have evolved, the various ways it manifests in our lives and societies, the different flavors it takes, and so forth, along the lines of Jonathan Haidt, Stephen Pinker, Richard Joyce and others. In fact Marks spends remarkably little time defending the evolutionary view. That's because he takes it to be well established already, and because he has his sights set on something more: why it is advisable not even to *pretend* that morality exists: "A clear-eyed review of the relative effects of believing and disbelieving in morality would move us to prefer an amoral regime" he says (p.38).

### **Meta-Ethical Marks**

Marks is so eager to divest himself of anything that sounds like morality that he says there's nothing we *should* do (because there are no moral 'shoulds'), only what we *want* to do – a view of human nature that he calls 'desirism'. All we ever do is what we want to do, he says. So the goal of his work is to convince us to desire amorality.

In this effort Marks succeeds brilliantly. His chapter entitled 'Might Amorality Be Preferable?' includes an excellent rant against the defects of our typical sense of morality: morality makes us angry; it promotes hypocrisy; it encourages arrogance; it's arbitrary, because there is no final justification for saying anything is right or wrong; it is imprudent, leading us to do things that have obviously bad consequences; it makes us intransigent, fueling endless strife; it is useless as a guide to life; and it leads philosophers to waste time on silly puzzles. By contrast, amorality is free of guilt, tolerant, interesting, explanatory and compassionate (when the blinders of blame are removed, we are free to consider others with an open heart), not to mention true. The upshot is that amorality is far more preferable. If you read only this

chapter, you will have gained a lot.

Marks is here making a *meta-ethical* claim – a claim about the status of ethics – which claim I like to explain in terms of the language that might be used to express it. That is, throughout the history of philosophy there have been two competing domains of discourse regarding ethics and morals, the Right and the Good. The Right pertains to duty and obligation: it refers to an obligation to obey moral rules; laws that are taken to be applicable universally and independent of one's own preferences. The Good pertains to benefits and harms: it is thinking in terms of consequences of actions that may be good or bad for the agent or others. In these terms, Marks' claim (which I find persuasive) is that Goodness trumps Rightness – that it makes more sense to speak of ethics (ie, ideas of the best way to live in society) in terms of benefits and harms than to speak in terms of duty and obligation. He does not quite spell it out that way, but his preference for 'goodness' or 'benefit' language is clear from passages such as these:

- "Believing this particular truth, that morality does not exist, will make things go better." (p.2)
- "Morality... does not exist and... it would be good for us to believe that." (p.3)
- "Abandonment of moral thinking and speaking... would be more effective in achieving... [a] common goal of maximally satisfying our considered desires." (p.63)
- "Morality breeds escalation of conflict, which is often to no one's net benefit." (p.66)

But if morality does not exist and it would be beneficial for us to quit speaking in moral terms, what is the alternative? What is the best way to live our lives? Marks' answer is to pursue only what you desire after due consideration:

"We now... have a replacement criterion to guide our actions in general, to wit: Figure out what you really want, that is, the hierarchy of your desires all things considered, and then figure out how to achieve or acquire it by means that are themselves consonant with that prioritized set of your considered desires." (p.53)

We might call this Marks' categorical imperative, except that he is quite clear that it is not a moral command but only advice. In contrast to morality, ethical commands, he says, are hypothetical, their application being contingent upon what is desired. By

this he means that you can legitimately offer advice such as, "If you want to be trusted, then you ought to be honest" (ethics), but you can't legitimately tell someone that they must absolutely be honest, without context and without reference to what they want (morality). Amoralist ethics is therefore quite practical, in that it lends itself to evidence-based assessments of how best to proceed; and it is intrinsically motivating, because its advice is based on what you actually want, not on what someone else tells you to do.

## Amoral Advice

There's a lot to like here. There are a few rough spots, to be sure. There's an egregious bit of sophistry on p.24, in which Marks assumes what he says needs proving. The discussion of evolution deserves a lengthier treatment. (*Hmm*, 'deserves'. Am I making a moral judgment?) And I suspect that it would not be so easy to abandon our sense of morality, since it is built-in by several hundreds of thousands of years of evolution. But these minor blemishes are far outweighed by the great service Marks has done in pointing out that the moral emperor has no clothes. The practicality of amoralism, in contrast to the intransigence of moralism, is quite appealing.

But I feel impelled to articulate one criticism: that Marks does not go far enough. He tells us to consider what we really want and then to act on our desires; but he gives no guidance about what to really want – by which I mean, no guidance about what it is important or advisable to want. What is important enough to care about? He asks us to pay attention to "our considered desires," but on what basis shall we consider them? Certainly we all have competing desires. How then shall we evaluate them? How shall we decide which of the contestants to favor? What is the best thing (or even a pretty good thing) to desire with sufficient intensity that we are moved to actually strive to achieve it?

'What's the best thing to desire?' is not a trivial question. Rather, it is one of the fundamental questions that philosophers have considered, since Socrates or earlier. Marks should at least offer some advice, then. That's what philosophy, the pursuit of wisdom, is all about. (That's a non-moral use of the word 'should', by the way: it means what is socially expected, not what is morally commanded.)

What would the advice be? My own view is that it would have to do with what

leads us to a fulfilling and flourishing life. Thinkers as diverse as Kant and Socrates agree that the desire to survive, thrive and feel happy and fulfilled is fundamental and essential to all humans. If you disagree and think something else is more to be desired, then consider that in order to fulfill that alternative desire, you would have to survive and thrive at least enough to be able to attain it, and once you attained it, you would, I presume, feel happy and fulfilled. So functioning well enough to survive and thrive is the fundamental aim of all of us.

Given that premise, the philosophical question becomes an empirical one: what enables us to function well? How are we constituted, what is good for us, and what are we good for and good at? In short: What is human nature?

I won't attempt to answer these questions here, but this shows there's more to the story of ethics than just to do what you want after due consideration. We can for instance make generalizations about what makes most people happy or what promotes the welfare of most people, and we can generate advice based on those generalizations. Such advice, being empirically based, would have a great deal of force. I think Marks would agree that it would have much more force than moralistic judgments based on false metaphysical presuppositions.

In sum, Marks has produced a thought-provoking work. I have not described all of it. There is a chapter on how an amoralist would address the contentious issue of animal welfare, for instance. There is another chapter on various alternative ways to conceive of morality. Scattered throughout are hints that Marks doubts many of the usual conceptions of free will. Perhaps he will write about that topic in the future. If so, I expect to read it with as much pleasure as I had reading *Ethics without Morals*.

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- *Ethics without Morals: In Defense of Amoralism*, by Joel Marks, New York and London: Routledge, 2013, 133 pages, ISBN: 978-0-415-63556-1